

“He will come again”

We are gathered here tonight to reflect on the mystery of our faith that – “Christ will come again.” As Catholics, we assert our faith in Christ’s Second Coming each time we attend mass or whenever we pray the Creed.

*‘He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end’* - affirms the Nicene Creed.

After the words of consecration at Mass we profess our faith:

‘We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection, until you come again.’

And this belief is firmly rooted in the teaching of Jesus himself. As we will hear in the Gospel this Sunday, on the Feast of Christ the King, Jesus spoke clearly about His Second Coming in glory, when he would judge each one according to their actions:

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats.’ (Matthew 25:31)

Christ’s Second Coming is an integral part of our Catholic faith. Yet, how often do we take time to reflect upon it? If you had to explain this doctrine to non-Christian friends, would you be able to do so satisfactorily?

It is fitting that we take time tonight to do so, as we approach the end of the Church’s liturgical year, and prepare for the Feast of Christ the King this coming Sunday, where we will celebrate our belief that Christ will indeed come to our earth again, this time not in the humility of birth as an infant in a stable, but in glory, His authority, power and dominion announced to all peoples.

There are several strands to my talk this evening; we’ll be looking at what Scripture and the Church teaches about Christ’s Second Coming; we’ll be comparing this to the understanding of the ‘rapture’ so popular amongst many evangelical Christians, and I’ll be inviting you to consider both the importance of our belief in Christ’s Second Coming for our Catholic faith, and some theological reasons why this aspect of our faith doesn’t hold the central place in our consciousness that it does for some other Christians.

However, before turning to any of these, I'd like to spend a few moments looking at what it is to 'do' theology; what, for Catholics, the theological process consists of.

Almost a thousand years ago, one of the greatest theologians the Church has known, St. Anselm of Canterbury defined theology as "faith seeking understanding."

According to this understanding of theology, faith is both the starting point and the guiding principle throughout our attempts to study God and the things of God. We begin as people of faith – as such, as Christians, we believe in Christ's Second Coming. However, we are not called to blind faith – far from it. Because our faith not only matters, but has supreme value, we are called to engage fully with our faith. God has gifted us with minds, intellects, rationality, and we are called to use them. This is true for all aspects of theology, but perhaps there is no aspect of our faith where it is more appropriate than eschatology, or the study of the 'last things'. In the face of a great 'mystery' such as the end of the world, or Christ's Second Coming, it is all too easy to put this to one side and not take the time and effort to reflect upon it. Alternatively, as we will see when we consider some evangelical Protestant approaches to Christ's Second Coming, it is easy to allow our human emotions and fascination with the spectacular, to dominate this aspect of Christian faith, so that it assumes a disproportional importance.

So, having set down the first criteria of my talk today – that of faith seeking understanding – I want to turn to a second important criteria of Catholic theology – that of 'the whole'. Catholic theology always keeps in mind the 'whole' or the entirety of the faith. The great twentieth century theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, stressed this, and taught that "the decisive Christian truths all mutually imply each other, because they are after all only aspects of the One... who is himself the truth",¹ and that "the whole has priority over the part."²

This criterion is vitally important when reflecting upon Christ's Second Coming, and is one that St. Bernard of Clairvaux (an extremely influential theologian and Doctor of the Church from the 12th century) set out clearly in one of his Advent homilies.³ He doesn't focus on simply the First Coming of Christ (which we celebrate at Christmas) nor on the Second Coming of Christ (which the season of Advent also prepares us for), but, **seeking the whole** of theology refers to 'a threefold coming of Christ.'

¹ Convergences P. 153.

² Elucidations P. 6.

³ Sermon 5 on Advent

“In the first coming the Lord was seen on earth and lived among mortals in the days when, as he himself bears witness, they saw him and hated him. In his last coming ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of our God’, and ‘they shall look on him whom they have pierced.’ The other coming is hidden. In it, only the chosen see him within themselves... In brief, his first coming was in the flesh and in weakness, this intermediary coming is in the spirit and in power, the last coming will be in glory and majesty.”

All three Comings of Christ illuminate the meaning of the others. And, as I’m sure you are all aware, for Catholics the intermediary Coming of Christ, His hidden presence in our souls, in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and in other people, particularly those who are most in need, are of vast importance.

Textbooks on theology generally distinguish between ‘realised’ and ‘future’ eschatology. Realised eschatology, seeing the End Times as already here in our midst, is backed up by such Scripture quotes as that of St. John’s Gospel, where he describes how we are judged here and now, by our response to Christ.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24)

Future eschatology, on the other-hand focuses on the actual end of human history – the End Times of the future, when Christ comes again in glory. For a balanced, truly Catholic faith, each of these needs to have its place.

In 1977, when Pope Benedict XVI was still known as Joseph Ratzinger, he wrote one of the definitive works on eschatology (beliefs about the End Times), called *‘Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life’*. (It’s a wonderful text, and one I’m going to refer to a few times during this talk.)

In this book, the Pope explains (in what I’m sure you will agree is a remarkably Catholic, holistic vision) the integral connection between realised and future eschatology; in the Eucharist the two mutually enrich each other. He describes Christian hope not as “some news item about tomorrow or the day after tomorrow”. Rather, “hope is personalized now. Its focus is not space and time, the question of ‘Where?’ and ‘When?’, but relationship with Christ’s person and longing for him to come .”⁴

The pope teaches that Christ’s Second Coming is the fulfilment of the Liturgy, and that Christ’s Second Coming provides an obligation to live the Eucharist fully. His description is so beautiful, I think that it’s worth quoting (don’t worry if you get a little lost!)

“The Parousia (Christ’s Second Coming) is the highest intensification and fulfilment of the Liturgy. And the liturgy is Parousia, a Parousia-like event taking place in our midst. ... Every Eucharist is Parousia, the Lord’s coming.... Seen in this perspective, the theme of the Parousia ceases to be a

⁴ Page 8.

speculation about the unknown. It becomes an interpretation of the Liturgy and the Christian life... The motif of the Parousia becomes the obligation to live the Liturgy as a feast of hope-filled presence directed towards Christ, the universal ruler.”⁵

ON POWERPOINT

What we have here is a wonderfully inspiring example of the relevance of Christ’s Second Coming to our everyday lives as Catholics; Christian life is diminished when this central mystery of our faith is neglected.

At this point I’d like to us to continue to draw inspiration from Pope Benedict’s book on eschatology, as we take time to consider the important question: why should Christians pray for Christ’s return in glory? We do, at every Mass, but have we thought through why we do?

There are several reasons why we pray for Christ’s return in glory; it will be the final victory over death, sin and evil. Body and soul will be re-united; those humans who have died will once again be ‘whole’. And, stressing human interdependence, Pope Benedict stresses that it is only at the Second Coming that the Church, the Body of Christ, will realise it is true; only then can the joy of the saints will be complete; only then will Christ’s joy be complete.

He gives an extremely beautiful quote from Origen (an extremely influential 3rd century theologian), which is worth quoting and taking time to reflect upon.

“... the Apostles have not yet received their joy: they are waiting for me to participate in their joy. So it is that the saints who depart from here do not immediately receive the full reward of their merits, but wait for us, even if we delay, even if we remain sluggish. They cannot know perfect joy as long as they grieve over our transgressions and weep for our sins. ... Abraham is still waiting to attain perfection. Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets are waiting for us in order to attain the perfect blessedness together with us. This is the reason why judgement is kept a secret, being postponed until the Last Day. It is ‘one body’ which is waiting for justification, ‘one body’ which rises for judgement. ...

You will have joy when you depart from this life if you are a saint. But your joy will be complete only when no member of your body is lacking to you. ... If you... do not have perfect joy as long as a member is missing, how much more must our Lord and Saviour, who is the head and origin of this body, consider it an incomplete joy if he is lacking certain of his members?... Thus he does not want to receive perfect glory without you: that means, not without his people which is ‘his body’ and ‘his members’.”⁶

⁵ Pages 203-204.

⁶ p.186, quoting *In Leviticum homiliae VII, 1-2*

ON POWERPOINT

So, Christ's Second Coming is a deeply joyful mystery of our faith; a mystery of hope, of fulfilment, of communion.

I am now just over half way through this talk, and I would like to just summarise the journey we have made so far, and point ahead to where we will be going for the rest of the talk. So, here is a brief resumé:

1/ We saw how the belief in Christ's Second Coming is firmly asserted in the Bible, in the Creed and in liturgical texts.

2/ I noted two criteria of Catholic theology – the need for us to engage rationally with our faith – “faith seeking understanding”; and Catholic theology being concerned with the ‘whole’; no doctrine of faith being able to be understood in isolation from other doctrines.

3/ We saw how both realised and future eschatology are clearly found in the Bible – and heard from Pope Benedict about the relationship between the Eucharist and the Second Coming (“Every Eucharist is Parousia, the Lord's coming”), and about the need for the Second Coming at the end of time, for a fulfilment, both of the Body of Christ, and of the saving work of Christ.

I would like us now to spend a few minutes looking more closely at what the Bible says about Christ's Second Coming. There is not time this evening to look at too many Biblical texts on the Second Coming (to do the subject justice it would need a whole series of talks) but it is important that we consider the book of Revelation and the questions of how it should be read.

Following this, I will outline one of the ways in which Christian teaching about the Second Coming can go wrong, considering the belief in the ‘Rapture’ held by many evangelical Christians, in which, I will argue, there is very little room given to the two Catholic criteria I have mentioned.

So, the book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, recounting the visions of St John the Evangelist, is, to put it mildly, an unusual text – and it is one that many of us may well have never read.

I would like to give a brief quote from the opening of Harry Maier's book '*Apocalypse Recalled*'; it illustrates well the fact that many Christians (perhaps we could say 'particularly Catholic Christians') have something of an aversion to the book of Revelation.

"Of all the books of the Bible, the Book of Revelation is probably the one that most of us would rather live without. Its strange characters and symbolism, its violent sequences of blood and death and war, its threats of judgement and eternal damnation make of Revelation a horrifying, bewildering, confusing text. ... In mainstream churches, one rarely hears sermons on the book of Revelation. In fact, one rarely hears from it at all."⁷

So, how should we read the book of Revelation, with its obscure language and vivid imagery? It is a very tricky question - Maier declares that "there are as many readings of Revelation as there are readers."⁸ I'd like to suggest that the two criteria mentioned previously can be a help to reading Revelation as a Catholic.

Firstly, we should engage our minds – in the faith that, (as we hear in 2 Timothy 3:16) "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching", we should seek to understand, and, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, "be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words."⁹ How then can we do this? When we hear of the rivers of blood in Rev. 16, or the "beast rising out of the sea with 10 horns and 7 heads" (Rev. 13:1), what can help us?

Again, the Catechism gives us some practical advice:

"In order to discover *the sacred authors' intention*, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current. For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression."¹⁰

So, for the book of Revelation, truth is expressed in symbolic terms and images, ones which would have been much more familiar to the original readers at the end of the first century than to us today. For instance, the prominence of the number seven in the text (there are the messages to the seven Churches, followed by the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowl judgements). Jewish readers would have instantly known that seven referred to completeness or perfection. Similarly, in Rev. 7:1-8 we are told of 144,000 who will be 'sealed'. Some Christians take this literally, thinking that only 144,000 people will go to heaven (for instance Jehovah's Witnesses, who have an 'anointed class' of 144,000). Catholics however, taking into account the symbolic meaning of the twelve times 12,000 (twelve pointing to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles) would never think of only 144,000 going to heaven.

⁷ Apocalypse Recalled P. ix

⁸ Apocalypse Recalled P. 8.

⁹ CCC 109 (cf. DV 12 § 1)

¹⁰ CCC 110 (DV 12 § 2)

The second criteria, that of reading a text in the light of or the 'whole' of Catholic teaching, is again something that the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches we should do. It instructs us to "be especially attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture"¹¹ and "to read the Scripture within the living Tradition of the whole Church."¹² Perhaps nowhere is this more important than for the book of Revelation.

So, how can we do this? One example is the imagery/symbols, which often refer back to the Old Testament or to the Gospels. (For instance, the image of the Lamb – which occurs 29 times – is to be understood in the light of the Jewish emphasis upon the sacrificial lamb, and of course, the imagery, particularly of John's Gospel, of Jesus as the Lamb of God.) So, bearing this in mind (as well as what I said about numerical symbolism earlier) we can make more sense of Rev. 5:6 ("I saw a Lamb standing as though it had been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the world."). Similarly, reading the verses which follow (Rev. 5:13-14) together with Philippians 2:10 ("at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth"), we see the unity of Scripture:

"And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever! And the four living creatures said 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshipped." (Rev. 5: 13-14)

So, having looked briefly at positive ways in which we can come to understand some of what is being expressed in the book of Revelation, I'd like to turn to one of the ways in which theology can go wrong in relation to Christ's Second Coming – namely by not remembering the importance of the 'whole' of Christian theology and by giving eschatology (teaching about the 'End Times') too much prominence. Significantly, such approaches are usually (if not always) grounded in a literal reading of the book of Revelation, which doesn't allow for symbolism.

In contrast to the Catholic rather ambivalent attitude towards the last coming, there is an ever-growing interest in the Second Coming – particularly in what has been named 'the rapture' amongst many Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians, helped in part by the 'left behind' books, movies, video games and children's books. Although being mainly influential in the USA, they are influencing many of the younger generation of evangelical Christians in this country. As an RE teacher in a Catholic Sixth College in London where many of the pupils attended evangelical Protestant churches I was amazed to find that the General RE class on 'heaven and hell' was the class the teenagers were most engaged with, eagerly sharing with one another their beliefs

¹¹ CCC 112.

¹² CCC 113.

on ‘the rapture’ – and leaving me aware of the massive gap not only between their beliefs and mine, but between their (and the pastors of the Churches they attended) method of doing theology, and the Catholic method of faith seeking understanding. There was little attempt to understand, but an enthrallment by the attempt to integrate the concepts of the book of Revelation (taken literally) into a system of what would happen at the end of the world. When the pupils did not dash away at the end of the class but stayed debating with one another, I knew that this was something I needed to do some research on.

As I began to do some initial investigation on what was meant by ‘the rapture’ and why these London teenagers were so fascinated by it, I came across some astonishing statistics.

Firstly, the popularity of the ‘left behind’ series in America was such that I wondered how I could have missed out on hearing about it:

“Since 1995, over fifty million books bearing the banner of the Left Behind series have showed up not only in Protestant bookstores but also in mainstream, secular bookstores. In 1998 the original four books of the series simultaneously occupied the top four slots in the New York Times bestseller list—which does not count sales figures from Protestant bookstores.”¹³

Slides 1 - 6 – on left behind

(6 – video for those who have been left behind after the rapture)

Slide 7

You probably will have heard about the prediction of the end of the world on May 21st 2011 by Harold Camping, a Christian broadcaster from California (president of Family Radio). His interpretation of the figures found in the Bible led him to believe that the rapture would occur on May 21st 2011, when Jesus would return to earth, the ‘righteous’ ascend to heaven and those left behind on earth suffer five months of plagues, fire and brimstone, before the end of the world on October 21st 2011. (He now believes that we can’t know when the End Times will occur.)

¹³ Akin, J. [False Profit: Money, Prejudice, and Bad Theology in Tim LaHaye's Left Behind Series](http://www.catholic.com/library/false_profit.asp) Catholic Answers Online article: http://www.catholic.com/library/false_profit.asp

His beliefs famously led to ingenious marketing ploys (see slide 6), such as 'After the rapture pet care', where for 10 dollars you could ensure that your pet would be looked after if you, as a good Christian were 'raptured' up into heaven and your pet left behind!

His predictions also give us an easy to understand insight into what those evangelical Christians who believe in 'the rapture' actually believe, which can be summed up in three easy steps:

1/ The term 'rapture' refers to Jesus taking 'the righteous' or the selected few up into heaven on a given date, and is based upon an interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17.

"The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

Note the significant phrase 'caught up' or 'raptured'

2/ 'The rapture' is understood to be different to the Last Judgment, which is believed to take place after a thousand years of Christ reigning during the 'Tribulation' for the sinners who have not been 'raptured'. Significantly this pattern is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Those who advocate belief in 'the rapture' have joined together literal interpretations of various Scripture passages. So, for instance, Revelations 3:10 is quoted as a Biblical source for the great 'Tribulation'.

Revelations 3:10 states: "Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the trial which is coming upon the whole world."

Now, if, we apply our reason to try to understand this passage, it is quite obvious that it has a specific meaning. As we know from Rev 3: 7 it is part of the message specifically addressed to the Church in Philadelphia (Asia Minor) at the end of the first century. It makes no sense to apply this specific message to the whole world at some unspecified time, thousands of years later, let alone to arbitrarily unite references about a thousand years in the book of Revelation (e.g. 20:1-3)

3/ Belief in 'the rapture' is less than 200 years old; it was "invented" by a man called John Nelson Darby, a Church of Ireland minister who joined the Plymouth Brethren and became a leader within it. His preaching about 'the rapture' was even criticised by some of his Plymouth Brethren, who saw that it had no substantial Biblical foundation, but, significantly, he dismissed their objections, claiming that God had revealed this doctrine to him – this 'personal' revelation having more weight for him than the Revelation of Scripture.

What should we, as Catholics, make of all this? Quite clearly, despite it being such an influential belief among many Christians, the Bible unequivocally teaches one future coming of Christ, when the dead shall be raised and Christ will judge the living and the dead. We will be reminded of this on Sunday, when Matthew 25: 31-46, the parable of the sheep and goats is read at Mass, and we hear that we will be judged on how we have treated others, particularly those who are most needy, in whom Christ is present now in our midst:

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you to drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?” And the King will answer, “I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25: 37-40)

I would like to give the last word to Pope Benedict:

“... faith in Christ’s return is also the certitude that the world will, indeed, come to its perfection, not through rational planning but through that indestructible love which triumphed in the risen Christ. Faith in Christ’s return is faith that, in the end, truth will judge and love will conquer.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Pages 213-214.